DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 104 CS 216 026

AUTHOR Culmer, Sean M.
TITLE Joint Tutoring: A Perspective on Tutoring the Incarcerated College Student.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997). Additional title on cover page is "Penning from the Penitentiary: Issues on Teaching Composition in College Prison."
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Correctional Education; *Correctional Institutions; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; Learning Strategies; *Student Needs; Student Participation; *Tutoring; *Tutors; *Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS Learning Environments; *Tutor Role

ABSTRACT

The challenges and headaches of tutoring college students in prisons are ample, but the joys of witnessing the academic benefits are precious. One tutor views his tutoring sessions much like a counselor would approach a therapeutic session with his/her client. The interaction is divided into 3 phases: assessment, intervention, and termination. The assessment or "getting to know each other" phase addresses the tutee's lack of trust--the tutor has to prove himself/herself. The intervention or "creativity" phase involves some unconventional tutoring methods to help the student grasp specific concepts. Motivation plays a primary role in this phase. The final phase, the termination or "give back" phase, pairs students with each other, building self-esteem, and encourages development of their own techniques of problem solving. Education is the key element that will restore communities, reduce crime, and unify factions across nations. Recidivism rates decrease as educational levels increase. (CR)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 461 104

Conference on College Composition and Communication

Penning From the Penitentiary: Issues on Teaching Composition in College Prison

Joint Tutoring: A Perspective on Tutoring The Incarcerated College Student

By

Sean M. Culmer

March/1997

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
S Culmer
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CS216026

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Biography

Sean M. Culmer

Sean Culmer is a native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His educational background includes degrees in Psychology from Ohio University and in Business Administration from Wilmington College. He will be receiving his masters degree in counseling from Liberty University.

Having obtained his formal education while incarcerated, he is a strong advocate of education and of human growth and development. In addition to tutoring and instructing incarcerated college students, he was instrumental in the construction of an English and Math skills center for Wilmington College's prison program. He also conducts workshops and seminars on career preparation and organizes career fairs.

Being a two time recipient of The Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Keepers of the Dream" award for outstanding community service, he plans to continue serving the community. His future goal is to develop some community based educational programs and to work in the area of family development.

For inquiries concerning the subject matter of this paper and presentation, he may be contacted at the following address or through Wilmington College:

Sean M.Culmer
P.O. Box 56 #176-343
Lebanon, OH 45036

For those who have been part of the college scene, a quick reflection brings to mind that most of us, as students, have tutored on one occasion or another. I am sure that it was a pleasurable experience in the giving of self to another soul. Perhaps this task of tutoring was even accomplished with a hint of superiority and a smidgen of pride in coming to the aid of some student who struggled to make it out of Algebra, with a passing grade, just as a desperate rabbit tries to free itself from the bonds of a trapper's snare. Yes, I am sure while in the role of a tutor your sincerity in helping these "unfortunate students" stretched to infinite bounds because we could identify with the pupil's plight having taken the same course just a few years earlier. However, ask yourself if it was not the least bit whimsically satisfying to know that you possessed the power to humble this student as Gepetto skillfully maneuvered Pinocheo from catatonic states to Alvin Alley rhythmic motions. Also, discovering that you were the bridge between satisfaction and failure resulted in a boost of self-estemm and self-empowerment. This may account for tutoring those students whom have come from under the wings of "Mommy and Daddy provides my every need first time ever been away from home" type of student. However, humbleness befalls those tutoring within the confines of a prison rather quickly. Here, the challenges and headaches of tutoring are in ample supply, but the joys of witnessing the academic benefits are more percious then finding a golden needle within a haystack.

Having been in the penal system for thirteen years, I

undoubtedly developed an appreciation for knowledge and discovered that it is the key that opens many doors while keeping others tightly shut. My affinity for learning is evident in the two bachelor degrees which I have earned while incarcerated and in the third, a masters in counseling, that I am currently working on. It is my belief that hoarding knowledge serves no purpose. Therefore, as quickly as I absorb academic delicacies, I readily disseminate this knowledge in the form of tutoring. When I first undertook this task years ago, I did not foresee the challenges that were to come.

The majority of the college students that I tutor are normal and typical with the exception that they are convicted felons which probably makes them anything but typical. A quick background sketch of those I tutor,whom I will refer to as my tutees, reveals individuals who want to learn but who also bring into the tutoring session skepticism, a lack of trust, and uncertainty. Being that most of my tutees come from impoverished communities, they have been subjected to the ills of society in the most extreme forms. These forms consist of individuals whose parent are crack addicts, drug dealers, prostitutes, and small time hustlers. For many of my students, they are second and even third generation convicts. Therefore, this prison environment is far from being foreign to them because as children weekends were often spent visiting Mom and Dad in the penitentiary. These college students have found themselves in "shoot-outs" and in various gang related activities. Moreover, until the younger convicts became

involved in something as positive as college many never expected to live past their eighteenth birthday.

I am not trying to paint a picture that everyone in prison is a victim of "the system". However, I am advocating that college is the one institution for awakening many, who are coming to prison, that there exist alternatives to being incarcerated. These individuals need to know that they can leave prison, with something positive upon their minds, to where they will never want to be a part of this penal system again. When I first walked through the doors of prison, it gave me a dose of reality in that this place is no joke to put it mildly. I found myself rapidly reflecting through my memory of life encounters in hopes of finding some type of experience for comparison purposes in order to establish a reference point for balance and stabilty. Unfortunately, none existed. Therefore, this experience has been like taking a final exam without being able to study for it.

I view my tutoring sessions much like a counselor would approach a therapeutic session with his or her client. Here, I divide the entire interaction into three phases: assessment, intervention, and termination. The assessment phase may also be thought of as "the getting to know each other" phase. On the part of the tutee, aside from being suspicious and lacking trust, there is a doubt of credibility towards the tutor. This is to be expected because the prison environment dictates that no one is trustworthy. Therefore, upon an initial meeting between a student and myself, the tutee can not possibly believe that my intentions are sincere. I can remember students

asking me how many packs of cigarettes I was charging for tutoring them. In prison, cigarettes are the medium of exchange. Others could not understand why I chose to tutor them for nineteen dollars a month which is the amount prison pays for a tutoring assingnment.

At this stage, I also have to prove myself because it is inconceivable that I could have mastered the course material as well as the professor. I can remember a time when I just gave the text to the student whom I was tutoring and told him to quiz me over anything in the book. This was the only way that I could convince him that I had a good comprehension of the material. During this period, it is common for tutees to spend more time challenging my knowledge of the subject matter then trying to learn the material. This escapade is more amusing than frustrating because it forms a bond between the student and myself, and it also reinforces my knowledge of the course material. Usually by the third tutoring session their apprehensions have subsided and now the learning process can actually begin as we move to the intervention phase

The intervention phase is also called the "creativity" phase because some very unconventional tutoring methods are implored to assist the student in grasping specific concepts. What works for one student will not always work for another. Again, be mindful that many of my tutees grew up in the "streets". Therefore, when interpreting the conflict between the Jews and the Palestinians of Israel, I may have to put it within the context of a confrontation between the rival gangs

of the Crips and the Bloods. I can remember tutoring one student who could not understand how to performing mathematical manipulations with negative intejers. It was not until we related these mathematical equations in terms of borrowing and selling cigarettes that he caught on. What I have learned over the years is that most of these students possess the necessary aptitude and intellectual abilities needed to be successful in any college whether it be a state supported or a private college. Believe me, if someone from the barrio or the hood can turn a couple of hundred dollars into a couple of hundred thousand dollars as fast as someone from Wallstreet, this person can surely make it at Harvard. It is a matter of channelling my tutees academic endeavors into a more positive mode. This is accomplished through exposure.

Motivation plays a primary role in the intervention phase. As for tutoring the incarcerated student, the question arises as to how do I increase the motivational level of one whose mind is preoccupied with major life changing events:parole board hearings, awaiting court decisions, and security level reviews. Aside from such issues, these students are constantly battling the ills of their environment. Sharing a cell, with an unknown individual, that is no larger than the size of a walk-in closet and living in an environment where the decibel levels far exceed that which is deemed appropriate for studying

are only a few of the issues that my pupils must endure. Also being a college student in the penal system often brings criticism from both prison guards and other residents.

In an effort to keep those whom I tutor focused, I've offered rewards from food to ink pens. For example, in group tutoring, I have often written an algebraic equation upon the board and offered a six pack of Pepsi to the first individual who can solve the problem. This approach instills positive competition which stimulates learning. In time, I can present the equation in the absence of a reward to where the thirst for knowledge and the academic competition, among students, is enough to motivate them towards solving the problem. As the end of the intervention phase approaches, student course involvement is phenomenally high, and even outside of the academic environment one witnesses once negative conversations praising antisocial behavior being replaced with conversations of accounting and English literature. Where once these felons spewed verbal gestures to entice physical confrontations, now their verbal jousting provokes progressive academic competition among each other. Believe me, it is much better that two students are arguing over Kipling's sonnets than over a drug deal. The outcomes will be drastically different. No longer do these students view each other as thugs and thieves but rather as potential computer programmers, psychologists and business consultants.

The final phase, the termination, or "give back" phase,

enables the tutee to become the tutor. Here, I pair students with each other and allow them to be tutors. My role is limited, and I assist only after all possible solutions have been exhausted. This phase builds self-esteem, and it encourages students to develop their own techniques of problem solving. In addition, this phase reinforces what students have already learned.

Having presented this paper, I would hope,if anything, that my listeners have come to learn that there are individuals within prison worth saving. Education is the key element that will restore communities, reduce crime and unify factions across nations. It cost far less to education someone than to incarcerate the same individual. The people whom I tutor are incarcerated and have had little education before coming to prison. However, considering their performance and how quickly they have excelled from the short time while in college, I can imagine how brilliant many of these students would have been if someone had encouraged them to continue in their schooling the years prior to coming to prison. It is satisfying to be able to assist another in their academic pursuits, and it is wonderful that those behind bars do have an opportunity to better ourselves academically. It is true that recidivism rates decrease as educational levels increase. Moreover, the battle also lies in reaching people,especially young people,prior to coming to prison. All of you in academia have a responsibility to help educate those from the most deplorable housing projects of our intercities to the poverty stricken peaks of Appalachia. If everyone does his or her part,then we do not have to hear about success stories coming from within the penitentiary

because they will all be coming from our communities.

In closing, I leave you with the following words from the book of Proverbs, chapter fifteen verses seven and fourteen, "The lips of the wise disperse knowledge" and "the heart of him that hath understanding seeketh knowledge".